San Francisco Maritime

National Park Service
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San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park



Sargent Johnson: Bay Area Artist

The Federal Arts Project (FAP), one of the many New Deal social and economic programs enacted during the Great Depression (1933-1941) by the Franklin D. Roosevelt Administration, employed many Bay Area artists in creating a variety of public art works.

These works were commissioned for public schools, military bases, libraries, and housing projects. Among these artists was Sargent Claude Johnson, 1888-1967, a prominent black sculptor, ceramicist, painter, and lithographer.

Beginning in 1935, Johnson kept steadily employed by working on and supervising various federally-funded projects. The FAP gave Johnson the opportunity to work with new materials on a massive scale and in well-equipped studios. One project he supervised was the Aquatic Park Bathhouse building.

Begun in 1936 and dedicated in 1939, the building was a joint project of the City of San Francisco and the New Deal WPA (Works Progress Administration). The building is a unique structure designed in the Streamline Moderne style and a focal point of the park. Both the interior and exterior contain art funded through the FAP.

Johnson designed and carved the green Vermont slate that adorns the museum entrance. The slate runs along the sides of the wide, main entrance and all across the tops of the doors. The two-inch thick pieces of slate were cut into three by four foot pieces and carved by Johnson offsite. They were then attached to the building using wires and plaster of Paris.

Johnson also designed the large tile mosaic that covers the second floor outer wall of the veranda. The greenish, blue tiles are filled with smiling fish and other fanciful images of the sea.

For much of the Depression Johnson was able to stay employed and off the relief rolls because of government sponsorship of art. During a 1964 oral history interview Johnson said that working with the Federal Arts Project was the best thing that ever happened to him. "It gave me more of an incentive to keep on working...I thought of getting out of it because I come from a family who thought all artists were drunkards and everything else. I thought I'd given it up at one time but I think the WPA helped me to stay."

In 2008, America celebrated the 75th anniversary of the New Deal. The Aquatic Park Bathhouse building, and its unique artwork, stands as a reminder of what the New Deal meant for Americans during the 1930s and 1940s.





Photo, left: Carved slate on the front of the Aquatic Park Bathhouse building. Photo, above: Section of the tile mosaic covering an outer second floor wall of the building. Artist Sargent Johnson, employed by the Federal Arts Project during the late 1930s, created both works. Photos: NPS